Global Definition of Social Work

The following definition was approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014:

Global Definition of the Social Work Profession

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels”.

COMMENTARY NOTES FOR THE GLOBAL DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK

The commentary serves to unpack the core concepts used in the definition and is detailed in relation to the social work profession’s core mandates, principles, knowledge and practice.

CORE MANDATES

The social work profession’s core mandates include promoting social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.

Social work is a practice profession and an academic discipline that recognizes that interconnected historical, socio-economic, cultural, spatial, political and personal factors serve as opportunities and/or barriers to human wellbeing and development. Structural barriers contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities, discrimination, exploitation and oppression. The development of critical consciousness through reflecting on structural sources of oppression and/or privilege, on the basis of criteria such as race, class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture and sexual orientation, and developing action strategies towards addressing structural and personal barriers are central to emancipatory practice where the goals are the empowerment and liberation of people. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty, liberate the vulnerable and oppressed, and promote social inclusion and social cohesion.

The social change mandate is based on the premise that social work intervention takes place when the current situation, be this at the level of the person, family, small group,
community or society, is deemed to be in need of change and development. It is driven by
the need to challenge and change those structural conditions that contribute to
marginalization, social exclusion and oppression. Social change initiatives recognize the
place of human agency in advancing human rights and economic, environmental, and social
justice. The profession is equally committed to the maintenance of social stability, insofar as
such stability is not used to marginalize, exclude or oppress any particular group of persons.

Social development is conceptualized to mean strategies for intervention, desired end states
and a policy framework, the latter in addition to the more popular residual and the
institutional frameworks. It is based on holistic biopsychosocial, spiritual assessments and
interventions that transcend the micro-macro divide, incorporating multiple system levels
and inter-sectorial and inter-professional collaboration, aimed at sustainable development.
It prioritizes socio-structural and economic development, and does not subscribe to
conventional wisdom that economic growth is a prerequisite for social development.

PRINCIPLES
The overarching principles of social work are respect for the inherent worth and dignity of
human beings, doing no harm, respect for diversity and upholding human rights and social
justice.

Advocating and upholding human rights and social justice is the motivation and justification
for social work. The social work profession recognizes that human rights need to coexist
alongside collective responsibility. The idea of collective responsibility highlights the reality
that individual human rights can only be realized on a day-to-day basis if people take
responsibility for each other and the environment, and the importance of creating
reciprocal relationships within communities. Therefore a major focus of social work is to
advocate for the rights of people at all levels, and to facilitate outcomes where people take
responsibility for each other’s wellbeing, realize and respect the inter-dependence among
people and between people and the environment.

Social work embraces first, second and third generation rights. First generation rights refer
to civil and political rights such as free speech and conscience and freedom from torture and
arbitrary detention; second generation to socio-economic and cultural rights that include
the rights to reasonable levels of education, healthcare, and housing and minority language
rights; and third generation rights focus on the natural world and the right to species
biodiversity and inter-generational equity. These rights are mutually reinforcing and
interdependent, and accommodate both individual and collective rights.

In some instances “doing no harm” and “respect for diversity” may represent conflicting and
competing values, for example where in the name of culture the rights, including the right
to life, of minority groups such as women and homosexuals, are violated. The Global
Standards for Social Work Education and Training deals with this complex issue by
advocating that social workers are schooled in a basic human rights approach, with an
explanatory note that reads as:

Such an approach might facilitate constructive confrontation and change where certain
cultural beliefs, values and traditions violate peoples’ basic human rights. As culture is
socially constructed and dynamic, it is subject to deconstruction and change. Such constructive confrontation, deconstruction and change may be facilitated through a tuning into, and an understanding of particular cultural values, beliefs and traditions and via critical and reflective dialogue with members of the cultural group vis-à-vis broader human rights issues.

**KNOWLEDGE**

Social work is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and draws on a wide array of scientific theories and research. ‘Science’ is understood in this context in its most basic meaning as ‘knowledge’. Social work draws on its own constantly developing theoretical foundation and research, as well as theories from other human sciences, including but not limited to community development, social pedagogy, administration, anthropology, ecology, economics, education, management, nursing, psychiatry, psychology, public health, and sociology. The uniqueness of social work research and theories is that they are applied and emancipatory. Much of social work research and theory is co-constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environments.

This proposed definition acknowledges that social work is informed not only by specific practice environments and Western theories, but also by indigenous knowledges. Part of the legacy of colonialism is that Western theories and knowledges have been exclusively valorised, and indigenous knowledges have been devalued, discounted, and hegemonised by Western theories and knowledge. The proposed definition attempts to halt and reverse that process by acknowledging that Indigenous peoples in each region, country or area carry their own values, ways of knowing, ways of transmitting their knowledges, and have made invaluable contributions to science. Social work seeks to redress historic Western scientific colonialism and hegemony by listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples around the world. In this way social work knowledges will be co-created and informed by Indigenous peoples, and more appropriately practiced not only in local environments but also internationally. Drawing on the work of the United Nations, the IFSW defines indigenous peoples as follows:

- They live within (or maintain attachments to) geographically distinct ancestral territories.
- They tend to maintain distinct social, economic and political institutions within their territories.
- They typically aspire to remain distinct culturally, geographically and institutionally, rather than assimilate fully into national society.
- They self-identify as indigenous or tribal.

[http://ifsw.org/policies/indigenous-peoples](http://ifsw.org/policies/indigenous-peoples)

**PRACTICE**

Social work’s legitimacy and mandate lie in its intervention at the points where people interact with their environment. The environment includes the various social systems that people are embedded in and the natural, geographic environment, which has a profound influence on the lives of people. The participatory methodology advocated in social work is reflected in “Engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.” As far as possible social work supports working with rather than for people.
Consistent with the social development paradigm, social workers utilize a range of skills, techniques, strategies, principles and activities at various system levels, directed at system maintenance and/or system change efforts. Social work practice spans a range of activities including various forms of therapy and counseling, group work, and community work; policy formulation and analysis; and advocacy and political interventions. From an emancipatory perspective, that this definition supports social work strategies are aimed at increasing people’s hope, self-esteem and creative potential to confront and challenge oppressive power dynamics and structural sources of injustices, thus incorporating into a coherent whole the micro-macro, personal-political dimension of intervention. The holistic focus of social work is universal, but the priorities of social work practice will vary from one country to the next, and from time to time depending on historical, cultural, political and socio-economic conditions.

It is the responsibility of social workers across the world to defend, enrich and realize the values and principles reflected in this definition. A social work definition can only be meaningful when social workers actively commit to its values and vision.

ADDITIONAL MOTIONS THAT WERE PASSED AT THE IFSW GENERAL MEETING RELATING TO THE GLOBAL DEFINITION OF SOCIAL WORK

“No part of this definition shall be construed in a way to interfere with any other parts of this definition”

“Amplifications on national and/or regional levels shall not interfere with the meaning of the elements of the definition and with the spirit of the whole definition”

“As the definition of social work is the key element for establishing the identity of an occupational group, a future revision of this definition has to be initiated only after precise evaluation of the implementation process and the need for change. Adding further comments is to be first choice before altering the definition.”